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Athlete Graduation Rate Gaps at Division-I State Flagship Universities: An Exploratory Analysis Emphasizing Black Males

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ABSTRACT: Discrepancies in Black male graduation rates at NCAA Division-I state flagship institutions have raised questions about claims of unilateral academic progress among certain revenue sport athletes. Researchers have identified gaps in NCAA and federal graduation rates between athletes and non-athletes based on race and type of sport participation. This exploratory study examines the degree to which graduation rates vary between football and male basketball athletes and male undergraduates at state flagship institutions. We pay particular attention to gaps in graduation rates for Black male athletes. We then seek theoretical explanations for these gaps by drawing on the athletic role-engulfment and key-player hypothesis, the mismatch education hypothesis, and the institutional isomorphism theory.

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While affirmative action has and continues to be a major concern on college campuses, there's one place where there does not seem to be a need for it: intercollegiate athletics, especially in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football and NCAA men's basketball. Within athletic departments one finds huge racial discrepancies with African Americans dominating some Division-I teams, but being totally absent from others. Indeed, in the most recent report Black males outnumber Whites in Division-I football for the first time since the NCAA began tracking data in 1999. In NCAA D-I men's basketball, Black athletes now account for nearly 61% of participants (Associated Press, 2010). An awareness of the seeming overrepresentation of African Americans in certain sports on many NCAA D-I campuses led to analysis and then concern about these students' educational outcomes. The issue first gained national attention in the late 1980s when two former NCAA and Olympic basketball players worked with members of Congress to force U.S. colleges and universities to publish athlete graduation rates (Selingo, 2012). Attention crested in 1999 as many observers were troubled by low graduation rates among Division-I football and men's basketball athletes.

Historically, low NCAA Division-I Black male football and basketball graduation rates have been a lightning rod issue. This criticism recently resurfaced in response to data released by the University of Pennsylvania that suggests these athletes graduated at a rate 22 percentage points lower than the general undergraduate student population and 5 percentage points lower than Black male undergraduates (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). Additional research has identified significant gaps between the graduation rates of full-time male NCAA Football Bowl Series (FBS) athletes, Division-I men's basketball players, and other full-time male students (Eckard, 2010; Southall et al., 2012a, 2012b).

Statistics on athletic graduation rates have evolved as the main measure of athlete success or failure at NCAA Division-I member institutions (Watt & Moore, 2001). Critics argue that while beneficial, a consequence of this development may be that institutions are tempted to cluster athletes in more academically friendly majors, create fake classes, or pressure academic support services into maintaining eligibility rather than encouraging athletes to pursue their own educational goals (Ridpath, 2002, 2008, 2010; Barrett, 2014). Although NCAA reports suggest Black scholarship athletes across all sports tend to graduate at higher rates than other Black students, only 20 of the 50 flagship public universities post a Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) for Black male athletes higher than the overall Black male student population (JBHE, 2005). These discrepancies prompted the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE) to question if academically selective flagship institutions were fulfilling their

public mandate of educating all students equally (JBHE, 2005). Hawkins (2010) claims that because they are a small percentage of students at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities (PWCUs), Black athletes are simultaneously visibly noticeable and invisible due to a preconceived notion that they are not academically prepared. The hyper-visibility v. invisibility dichotomy results in some Black athletes at PWCUs feeling alienated or racially isolated (Hawkins, 2010). When a Black male athlete begins his career the main focus is often on athletic prowess rather than academic achievement. When Black male college athletes' academic progress is a focal point, it is often treated as an exceptional occurrence. This results in many Black male college athletes being viewed as "minority" affirmative action admits (Hawkins, 2010).

We have two primary aims in this paper: first, we empirically explore the degree to which Black and White male NCAA Division-I football and basketball players (and students more generally) at flagship state universities graduate at different rates. Second, we interpret our findings drawing on three well-known theoretical frameworks: athletic role-engulfment and key-player hypothesis, mismatch education hypothesis, and institutional isomorphism hypothesis. But first, we provide a brief description of the Black male athlete, and then explain the different methods used to measure graduation rates: the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR), the Graduation Success Rate (GSR), and the Adjusted Graduation Rate (AGR).

BLACK MALE ATHLETES AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Black male college athletes occupy an important and unique place in the NCAA Division-I collegiate model of athletics (Brand, 2004). Over the past four decades Black men have increasingly come to dominate football and basketball programs at PWCUs flagship institutions (Brand, 2006). *The 2009–10 Student-Athlete Race and Ethnicity Report* revealed that for the first time African Americans comprised the highest percentage of NCAA Division-I football players (Zgonc, 2010). The study also reported that 60.9% of NCAA Division-I men's basketball players were Black (Brown, 2011). By contrast, Black males accounted for just 2.8% of full-time, degree-seeking undergraduate college students (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013).

As Harrison and Lawrence (2004) noted, as Black male participation in NCAA football and men's basketball has increased, so has the widely held belief in Black athletic superiority (Hoberman, 1997). College-sport fans' current infatuation with Black athleticism perpetuates the negative stereotype of

Blacks as physically superior but intellectually inferior to Whites. Harrison and Lawrence (2004) contend the manner in which this debate has been framed is biased, political, and limited in analysis. They contend the scientific preoccupation with racially linked genetic differences is racist, since it is founded on and naturalizes racial categories as fixed and unambiguous biological realities, thus obscuring the political processes of racial formation (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004).

The stereotypical belief of Black males' athletic superiority and intellectual inferiority (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Hawkins, 1999, 2010) is fueled by the overrepresentation of Black male college athletes in the high-profile revenue sports of football and men's basketball as well as the underrepresentation of Black male students in the general student body at PWCUs. As Harper et al. (2013) noted, "Between 2007 and 2010, Black men were 2.8% of full-time, degree-seeking undergraduate students, but 57.1% of football teams and 64.3% of basketball teams" (p. 1).

Reacting to the existence of these attitudes, the NCAA contends its Academic Progress Program (APP) reform efforts have successfully changed college sport's "dumb jock" culture (Porter, 2011). This cultural change has been highlighted in a public service announcement entitled *Dumb Jocks* and remarks by NCAA president, Mark Emmert. In addition, the NCAA points to its reports that athletes, particularly African American males, are graduating at higher rates than their counterparts in the general student body in almost every category (NCAA Research, 2011).

Since Black college students are more likely to drop out for financial reasons, an athletic grant-in-aid (GIA) may be vitally important to economically disadvantaged Black players (JBHE, 2005). In short, FBS football and NCAA D-I men's basketball players are working their way through school by "playing" football or basketball. These athletes' graduation rates have economic relevance, since over their lifetime Black male college graduates have twice the mean earning capacity of Black high school graduates—an absolute difference of \$1.03 million on average (Sum et al., 2007). Additionally, the average Black male college graduate will pay nearly \$500,000 more in taxes compared to the average Black male high school dropout, who receives nearly \$190,000 more in cash and in-kind government benefits than he will pay in payroll and income taxes over his working life (Sum et al., 2007).

While such data are heartening, Comeaux and Harrison (2011) contend college athletes, especially Division-I revenue-sport athletes, not only face "... all of the challenges [e.g., social and academic adjustments to college] experienced by other students in the general population... [but also face] demands

imposed by their sports, which create considerable challenges to student life” (p. 236). These demands include over 40 hours a week devoted to practices, travel, team meetings, and midweek game schedules. The demands of these athletic “jobs” (Southall & Weiler, 2014) result in mental fatigue, physical exhaustion, and nagging injuries. In addition to having less time to devote to academic pursuits, by choice or heavily influenced by the athletic structure, college athletes also live, eat, study, and socialize together and are even tracked into the same majors (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Southall & Weiler, 2014). The resulting isolation poses a challenge to their academic success and—in many ways—affects the quality of their college experience. Harper et al. (2013) highlight the fact that “97.4% of institutions graduated Black male student-athletes at rates lower than undergraduate students overall. On no campus were rates exactly comparable for these two comparison groups” (p. 1).

In light of these data, Howard (2014) contends Black males, including college athletes, often succeed not because of, but in spite of their schools. In 2013, Jean Boyd, president-elect of National Association of Athletic Academic Advisors (N4A), commented on the competing interests at play in big-time college sport: “Big time college athletics is a business and anytime you have games on Tuesday nights, it is not in the best interest of the student-athlete. It’s in the best interest of the institution” (Robinson, 2013, para. 21). Reflecting this struggle, Southall, Eckard, Nagel, and Randall (in press) examined Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football and NCAA D-I men’s basketball programs and found a significant relationship between a team’s athletic success and lower graduation rates among Black players.

With conflicting and competing measures of academic success, as well as media and NCAA reports of record graduation rates for college athletes, an understanding of the various graduation-rate metrics is important. Since many readers may have only a cursory knowledge of graduation rates, in the following sections we delineate three graduation rates, and then discuss the study’s methodology and results.

COMPETING MEASURES OF GRADUATION RATES

Federal Graduation Rate

In 1995, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) operationally defined the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) as the percentage of full-time, first-time bachelor-degree-seeking students enrolled in any fall semester who had completed their degree requirements within 150% of the normal time span (Sack, Park, & Thiel, 2011; Selingo, 2012). The FGR involved a straightforward calculation based on the question, “How many students who initially enroll as

first-time, full-time first-year students at a given university graduate from that university within six years?" Since students are not removed from the cohort if they later switch to part-time enrollment or transfer, the FGR provides a mechanism to determine the extent to which colleges and universities retain and graduate enrollees who begin as full-time students. The strength of the FGR is its focus on student retention; however, transfer students are treated as non-graduates from their original institutions even if they graduated from another institution at a later date (Southall, 2012). Critics note that one-third of all college students in the US transfer at least once within five years (Selingo, 2012). Despite its limitations, the FGR remains the only easily available college performance-measure applicable to the general student body.

In addition to providing information about the general student body, the FGR is calculated for full-time athletes who receive athletic aid (i.e., a grant, scholarship, tuition waiver, or other assistance awarded on the basis of athletic ability) for any period of their enrollment. Just as other students, athletes who do not graduate from the school in which they initially enroll within six years count as non-graduates against the school's FGR (Hosick, 2010; Selingo, 2012). The FGR is often criticized for not including athletes who transfer and then graduate from other schools (Hosick, 2010; Zhong, 2008). However, it offers the additional benefit of allowing for the calculation of a Federal Graduation Gap (FGG), reflecting the difference (e.g., gap) in graduation rates between cohorts. For example, if the FGR for a university's overall male student body is 65% and the FGR for its Black male students is 49%, the Black male student FGG would be -16, while the overall male student body FGG would be +16.

In 1999 when the first series of disclosure reports were published for the 1995 cohort, many observers, including the Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (KCIA), were troubled by college athletes' low graduation rates, particularly in NCAA D-I football (37.5%) and men's basketball (33%) (KCIA, 1999). With low college football and men's basketball FGRs persisting, as well as ongoing academic scandals occurring at high-profile flagship schools (e.g., Auburn University, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and University of Tennessee-Knoxville), some critics question the alignment of "big-time" college sport with universities' academic missions (e.g., Maloney & McCormick, 1993; Heydorn, 2009; Nocera, 2012; Harper et al., 2013).

Graduation Success Rate

As part of its 2003 academic reform program, the NCAA developed and promoted an alternative athlete graduation rate metric: the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) (Christianson, 2005). Justifying the GSR, the NCAA national

office noted, "... [university] presidents had long been disappointed with a federal methodology in which so many student-athletes are simply lost in the calculation" (Hosick, 2010, p. 6). Since the inception of the GSR, NCAA officials have consistently contended it "... is a more accurate rate since it credits institutions for incoming transfers who graduate, and it removes from the calculation transfers who leave the institution in good academic standing" (NCAA News Archives, 2010).

While the GSR is an important internal graduation rate calculation for athletic departments, its sample and methodology are different from the FGR, which does not account for transfers into or out of an institution. When the first GSR report was released in 2005, it was not intended to replace the FGR, but was designed to complement it, since general student body transfer or retention is not aggregated and widely reported on a national basis (NCAA, 2005; NCAA Research Staff, 2013). Yet, over time the NCAA national office has increasingly highlighted GSR rates in its yearly graduation report and referred to it as "a more accurate measure of graduation," which indicates "... the federal rate might actually be underestimating the long-term student-level graduation performance" (Hosick, 2010, p. 5, 14). As a result of data being drawn from a different sample and employing a different methodology, the GSR rate is almost always higher than the FGR (Southall, 2012). In addition, while the GSR removes athletes who transfer (or leave a school in good academic standing, but do not enroll in another school) from a university's GSR cohort, it cannot shed light on why athletes left a school: "Did a player leave seeking a professional-sport opportunity, transfer to another school, or simply drop out and go home?" In effect, it treats dropouts as transfers, and so overestimates graduation rates.

Despite the FGR's limitations, LaForge and Hodge (2011) note any comparison (inadvertent or purposeful) of athletic GSRs to overall student-body FGRs is methodologically inappropriate. While such comparisons generally cast an athletic team in a more favorable light, they are invalid since the two samples are drawn from different populations (LaForge & Hodge, 2011). In addition, Gurney and Southall (2012) contend:

By consistently asserting the GSR "more accurately assesses the academic success" of college athletes and steadfastly referring to GSR rates, NCAA members have convinced the media to almost exclusively use the new, more-favorable metric. Intentionally or not, the NCAA's Academic Progress Rate (APR) and GSR metrics confuse the media, fans and the general public. (p. 17)

These scholars note that while using the GSR to highlight graduation “success” may be a savvy marketing and public relations tool, it has “... increasingly fostered acts of academic dishonesty and devalued higher education in a frantic search for eligibility and retention points” (Gurney & Southall, 2012, p. 17). Although the NCAA emphasizes the GSR metric, there is no corresponding GSR for non-athletes. Therefore GSRs cannot be used for comparisons with general student body graduation rates, and so the GSR was excluded from our study.

Adjusted Graduation Rate

Heydorn (2009) argues a graduation gap is an appropriate indicator when comparing college athletes to other undergraduates. Rische (2004) further contends a graduation gap comparison makes sense because it is a more standardized measure of relative success. The Adjusted Graduation Rate (AGR) model compensates for any potential downward bias in the general student body FGR through regression-based adjustments for the percentage of part-timers in a school’s student body. Part-time students take longer to graduate and therefore pull down general student body FGRs, which include part-timers who switch from full-time after their initial enrollment. In this study we utilize the Adjusted Graduation Gap (AGG) to explore differences in athlete graduation rates. The AGG calculates the difference (e.g., gap) between the AGR for full-time male students (both Black and White) and the FGR of both full-time Black and White football and men’s basketball players.

RESEARCH SETTING

Before outlining the methodology and reporting the results, several items are noteworthy and delineate this study’s research setting:

1. Neither the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR), mandated by Congress, nor the NCAA’s GSR is perfect or inherently a more accurate metric; they utilize different sampling and statistical analyses to examine different cohorts. In short, they are different graduation rates.
2. The GSR consistently returns a “success” rate 12–25% higher than the FGR. As far back as 1991 (NCAA, 1991), the NCAA knew that by removing 1/4 to 1/3 of what it referred to as “eligible dropouts” from the sample would result in a markedly higher “success” rate.
3. A comparison of published FGRs of NCAA athletes and the general student population includes a significant number of part-time students at many schools. This is problematic because NCAA athletes must be “full-time.” Consequently, it makes sense to compare full-time college athletes with other full-time students. Without adjusting for the possible downward “part-timer bias” in the student-body rate, any comparison may be

distorted—or somewhat skewed. Because part-time students take longer to graduate, reported general student-body FGRs may be significantly reduced, making the relative rate of college athletes at many schools and conferences appear more favorable.

4. Finally, since there is no comparable national-level GSR for the general student body, GSR and FGR data should NOT be reported simultaneously. To do so in press releases or dataset tables invites inappropriate comparisons and fosters confusion. (Southall, 2014a, pp. 5–6)

METHODS

Description of Samples

Our study focuses on Division-I state flagship universities to explore the degree to which graduation rates vary between football and male basketball athletes, and male undergraduates. In determining universities to include in the study's sample, the first criterion was based on institutions possessing at least one of Berdahl's (1998) three attributes of flagship universities:

[1] These institutions formed the core of the public systems of higher education in their respective states. . . . [2] In most cases, these institutions were the first public universities to be established in their states. . . . [3] They became the centers for research and graduate education and they developed an array of professional schools that added to their size, scope, and preeminence. (pp. 5–6)

The next inclusion requirement was the university must be listed in the annual *USA Today College and Tuition and Fees Survey of 75 Public Flagship Universities*. Finally, this group was delimited to universities ($N = 60$) that were members of the NCAA D-I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). Table 1 lists all flagship universities in our sample.

The sample's graduation rate data were obtained from the 2012–13 NCAA FGR database (NCAA, 2015) and 2012 College Sport Research Institute (CSRI) AGG Reports for FBS football and men's basketball (Southall et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2013). Eckard's (2010) regression modeling was utilized to estimate full-time male adjusted graduation rates (AGRs). Since all NCAA athletes must be full-time students, it was not necessary to adjust reported FGR data for football or men's basketball players (Eckard, 2010). Each flagship university's Black and White student enrollment data (e.g., percent part-time and ethnic breakdowns) were obtained from the National Center for Educational Statistics and *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System*, National Center for Educational Statistics.

Table 1. NCAA Division-I FBS Flagship Universities (N = 60)

University	University
Arizona State University	University of Hawaii, Manoa
Auburn University	University of Idaho
Clemson University	University of Illinois, Champaign
Colorado State University	University of Iowa
Florida State University	University of Kansas
Indiana University	University of Kentucky
Iowa State University	University of Maryland, College Park
Kansas State University	University of Michigan
Louisiana State University	University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Michigan State University	University of Mississippi
Mississippi State University	University of Missouri, Columbia
New Mexico State University	University of Nebraska, Lincoln
North Carolina State University	University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Ohio University	University of Nevada, Reno
Oklahoma State University	University of New Mexico
Pennsylvania State University	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Purdue University	University of Oklahoma
Rutgers, St. University of New Jersey	University of Oregon
Texas A&M University, College Station	University of South Carolina, Columbia
The Ohio State University	University of Tennessee, Knoxville
U. at Buffalo, The St. U. of New York	University of Texas, Austin
University of Alabama	University of Utah
University of Arizona	University of Virginia
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville	University of Washington
University of California, Berkeley	University of Wisconsin, Madison
University of California, Los Angeles	University of Wyoming
University of Colorado, Boulder	Utah State University
University of Connecticut	Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State U.
University of Florida	Washington State University
University of Georgia	West Virginia University

Statistical Analyses

Reported graduation gaps (i.e., FGG and AGG) were obtained by comparing various FGR and AGR cohorts. The resulting gaps are expressed as either a negative or positive value, negative (-) if the second listed integer is less than and positive (+) if it is greater than the first. In order to determine if there were significant differences in various cohort mean graduation rates, paired-sample T-tests were performed.

RESULTS

Frequencies and Descriptive Statistics

While all flagship universities in the sample have Football (FB) FGRs, eight men’s basketball programs had reported FGRs from only one ethnic group.¹ Seven schools have no White FGR and one has no Black FGR. As a result, the sample for Black basketball player (BB) FGRs and AGGs was $n = 59$, and the White Basketball (BB) FGR and AGG sample was $n = 53$. Initial frequencies and descriptive statistics (summarized in Table 2) reveal a range of cohort graduation rates. Within all cohorts White males had higher graduation-rate means than Black males. In addition, consistent with previous research (Southall et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2013), within each ethnic group full-time male students have higher graduation rates than football and men’s basketball players. Athlete FGR means ranged from 36.4% for Black men’s basketball players to 65.3% for White football players.

Table 2. Flagship Universities’ Graduation Rates Descriptive Statistics

	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
	AGR	AGR	BB FGR	BB FGR	FB FGR	FB FGR	BB AGG	BB AGG	FB AGG	FB AGG
N =	60	60	59	53	60	60	59	53	60	60
Mean =	56.6	76.4	36.4	59.5	46.0	65.3	-20.2	-16.9	-10.6	-11.1
Median =	56.4	77.2	38.0	67.0	46.0	67.5	-22.1	-16.0	-13.0	-12.9
StDev =	9.9	10.0	22.3	32.8	10.7	12.8	24.7	30.7	12.9	14.1
Min =	37.0	54.3	0.0	0.0	25.0	33.0	-63.6	-79.0	-42.7	-48.0
Max =	80.2	94.7	100.0	100.0	82.0	93.0	51.4	35.3	17.5	25.0

Graduation Gap Summaries

Utilizing the mean AGRs and FGRs described in Table 2, we examine graduation gaps within and between various cohorts. As a result of different sample sizes, presenting the basketball and football AGG comparisons in one table is problematic. Therefore Table 3 summarizes comparisons for basketball, while Table 4 presents football AGGs.

Consistent with overall-sample results, within-ethnic-group comparisons of flagship university men’s basketball programs ($n = 52$) reveal double-digit positive graduation gaps for White males (see Table 3, “Within Cohort Gap” column). Among full-time males, White students have a significant AGG of +19.8 ($t = 15.0$) relative to Black students. All 52-flagship schools have White male student body AGRs that exceed those of Black males. Comparing men’s basketball FGRs, White players had a +23.8 FGG ($t = 4.74$) relative to Black players. For 41 sample schools (79%), White basketball players’ FGRs exceed those of Black players. The within-group comparisons show significant negative athlete graduation gaps. The Black athlete-student AGG is -22.3 and the White athlete-student AGG is -18.3. Interestingly, when the FGRs of Black and White men’s basketball players are compared to the AGRs of full-time male students of the same ethnicity, the resulting difference in AGGs is insignificant. This difference is -4.0 (-22.3 vs. -18.3), with a t-stat of 0.85.

The last column of Table 3 shows cross-group comparisons. The Black basketball FGR compared to the White student body AGR yields an AGG of -42.1. In effect, the negative within-Black AGR/BB FGR gap (-22.3) is

Table 3. *Flagship Graduation Gaps Summary Table: Basketball (N=52)*

Cohort	Mean	Within Cohort Gap	Athlete - Student AGG^	Student v. Athlete B v. W AGG
1. Black Male AGR	57.2	+19.8 (2-1)	—	—
2. White Male AGR	77.0	($t = 15.0$)*	—	—
3. Black Men’s BB FGR	34.9	+23.8 (4-3)	-22.3 (3-1)	-42.1 (3-2)
4. White Men’s BB FGR	58.7	($t = 4.74$)*	($t = 6.67$)*	($t = 12.2$)*
			-18.3 (4-2)	+1.5 (4-1)
			($t = 4.33$)*	($t = 0.35$)

* p-value < 0.0001; paired difference-between-means test; null hypothesis: difference = 0.
Note. ^Athlete - Student (Same ethnicity).

Table 4. Flagship Graduation Gaps Summary Table: Football (N=60)

Cohort	Mean	Within Cohort Gap	Athlete - Student AGG [^]	Student v. Athlete B v. W AGG
Black Male AGR	56.6	+19.8 (2-1)	—	—
White Male AGR	76.4	(<i>t</i> = 15.2)*	—	—
Black FB FGR	46.0	+19.3 (4-3)	-10.6 (3-1) (<i>t</i> = 6.37)*	-30.4 (3-2) (<i>t</i> = 17.5)*
White FB FGR	65.3	(<i>t</i> = 8.5)*	-11.1 (4-2) (<i>t</i> = 6.09)*	+8.7 (4-1) (<i>t</i> = 4.99)*

*p-value < 0.0001; null hypothesis: difference = 0.

Note. [^]Athlete - Student (Same ethnicity).

compounded by the negative Black-White AGR gap (-19.8). In contrast, the White BB FGR compared to the Black AGR yields an AGG of +1.5. In other words, White basketball players on average graduate at a rate slightly higher than the Black male student body, although the difference is not statistically significant (*t* = 0.35). Here the negative within-White AGR-BB FGR gap (-18.3) is offset by the positive White-Black AGR gap (+19.8).

Table 4 summarizes the graduation-gap analysis for 60 FBS football flagship universities. A within-cohort examination disclosed similar significant positive graduation gaps (i.e., AGGs and FGGs) for White males: the White male AGG equals +19.8 (*t* = 15.2) and the White FB FGG is +19.3 (*t* = 8.5). As with men's basketball, all 60 FBS flagship schools have White AGRs that exceed Black AGRs. For 53 of the 60 schools (88%), the White football players' FGRs exceed Black football FGRs. In addition, Black football players had a -10.6 AGG (*t* = 6.37) when compared to Black full-time male students, while the White FB AGG was -11.1 (*t* = 6.09). Consistent with the men's basketball sample, the difference between Black and White FB AGGs was almost zero (0.5), with an insignificant t-stat (0.20).

The last column of Table 4 shows cross-group comparisons. The Black FB FGR compared to the White AGR yields an AGG of -30.4. In effect, the negative within-Black AGR-FB FGR gap (-10.6) is compounded by the negative Black-White AGR gap (-19.8). In contrast, the White FB FGR compared to the Black AGR yields an AGG of +8.7 (*t* = 4.99). In other words, White football players on average graduate at a rate higher than the Black male student body by a statistically significant amount. Here the negative within-White AGR-FB

FGR gap (-11.1) is more than offset by the positive White-Black AGR gap (+19.8).

DISCUSSION

Graduation Gap Explanations

Our results show substantial gaps between the graduation rates of revenue-sport athletes, both football and basketball, and their ethnic peers in the general student body at state flagship universities. In light of these results and given the findings of related studies (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; JBHE, 2005; NCAA Research Staff, 2011; Eckard, 2010; Southall et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2013; TIDES, 2012), we explore the utility of three theoretical constructs: one emphasizing the individual level (role-engulfment), the structural level (mismatch education hypothesis), and the organizational level (institutional isomorphism).

Role Engulfment and the Key-Player Hypothesis

Our findings support Shulman and Bowen's (2001) research, which revealed that not only do collegiate athletes under-perform academically, these deficiencies were more pronounced in men's basketball, football, and hockey. Shulman and Bowen (2001) along with other scholars (Aries et. al., 2004; Cantor & Prentice, 1996; Simons et al., 1999) argue that the time demands faced by these athletes force them to make academic sacrifices. Susceptibility to *athletic role engulfment* and a decreased ability to balance athletic and academic burdens may occur when professional career aspirations and motivations are closely linked (Adler & Adler, 1989, 1991; Simons, Van Rhee, & Covington, 1999; NCAA Research, 2011).

A related factor that may impact the academic performance of college athletes is the "key-player" hypothesis, which posits that key players (e.g., starters and stars) face disproportionate time demands, logging more playing time over the course of their college career (Bowen & Levin, 2003). Today's profit-sport environment, in which a large majority of state flagship Division-I football and men's basketball starters (key players) are Black athletes, many of whom were granted "special-admit" status, poses unique challenges at state flagship institutions.

Mismatch Theory and Academic Underpreparedness

In 2009, Dr. Gerald Gurney, president-elect of the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A), took issue with the NCAA's deemphasis of minimum initial eligibility requirements, "[T]oo many athletes are

overmatched in the classroom and cheating and scandal are inevitable” (Wieberg, 2009, p. 1). Despite NCAA graduation success proclamations, Gurney’s assertion offers a plausible explanation for the graduation gaps identified in our results, based in part on a mismatched-student hypothesis or *mismatch theory*. This theory claims students whose college admission is dependent on preferential (i.e., affirmative action) policies have less academic success than students who are prepared to flourish in an educationally rigorous environment. Critics of such “special-admission” programs point to the poor academic performance of minorities, athletes, and legacy students at highly selective universities as evidence of an “educational mismatch” (Sanders & Taylor, 2012; Perry, 2012).

In 2013, more than half of NCAA Division-I Faculty Athletic Representatives (FARs) reported their institutions admit players who do not meet standard admissions requirements (Wolverton, 2013). Admissions data submitted by NCAA Division-I athletic programs revealed relaxed special-admission standards; with athletes from 27 identified universities being ten times more likely to benefit from such programs (Scherzagier, 2009). And, according to Comeaux and Harrison (2007) and Sellers (1992), Black college athletes tend to enter college with lower academic credentials.

Although athletes may be admitted with lower academic credentials (Hood et al., 1992; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Bowen & Levin, 2003), Massey and Mooney’s (2007) model remains one of the few studies to test the explanatory powers of mismatch theory for college athletes at competitive universities. Constructed from a sample of nearly 4,000 students, including 294 first-year varsity or junior varsity athletes at 28 elite American colleges and universities, Massey and Mooney found minorities and athletes who received an SAT admissions bonus did not earn significantly lower grades through the end of their sophomore year. Likewise, research by Alon and Tienda (2005) suggest affirmative action programs do not set up minorities (in general) or athletes (in particular) for academic failure in competitive academic environments. However, Massey and Mooney did acknowledge that legacies and athletes who attend a school that practices institutional affirmative action are more likely to leave at higher rates.

Institutional Isomorphism

Rather than conceiving of the NCAA as an independent regulatory agency and Division-I flagship institutions as competing firms, viewing these entities as a single organizational field allows us to explore Black male athlete graduation gaps as a collective action between relevant actors. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), once disparate organizations in the same line of

business are structured into an actual field, either by the state, competition, or profession, powerful forces emerge that lead them to become more similar to one another (p. 148). Institutional isomorphism theory posits that organizations constantly try to change, but after a certain degree of maturity occurs in an organizational field, the aggregate effect of such changes is to lessen the extent of diversity within the field (p. 149). It is therefore possible that after decades of interaction regarding the governance of college sports, the NCAA and Division-I flagship institutions have matured to the point that institutional isomorphism now guides the organizational field.

Division-I schools in revenue sports confront common pressures to field winning teams that in turn create tensions between the role of “student” and the role of “athlete,” as described above. Over time, formal and informal rules and procedures have evolved in the organizational field regarding recruiting and academic support for student-athletes that, in fact, have emphasized athletics over academics. Institutional isomorphism suggests that such changes in rules and procedures would tend to reduce the diversity of academic outcomes across schools. Our results are consistent with this, indicating, for example, that in 80% of flagship institutions (4 of 5) both Black and White football players graduate at rates lower than their ethnic peers, and in 88% of institutions (about 8 of 9) Black players have lower FGRs than White ones.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Making sense of athlete and student graduation rates is challenging. This task is initially based on the difficulty of establishing a standard, comparable graduation rate for both cohorts. The American Council on Education acknowledges that while a graduation rate can be a simple matter of developing a standard measure that is easy to calculate, interpreting graduation rates is far more complex and analytically challenging (Cook & Hartle, 2011). In fact, it took the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) five years after Congress enacted the *Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act of 1990* (SRTK) to officially operationalize the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) in 1995.

In response to public outcry over persistently low graduation rates and ongoing academic scandals at high-profile state flagship schools, the NCAA began instituting a series of academic reforms in 2003. Though scholars have examined the merits and impact of these reforms on graduation rates, less attention has focused on gaps in graduation rates that compare college athletes to other undergraduates. Even fewer studies have focused on examining the graduation gaps based on racial differences and types of sport participation.

While the NCAA, in an effort to maintain the perception of a clear line of demarcation between its collegiate model and professional sport, has consistently reported record GSR's and sought to position these reports as the "best" or most accurate graduation rate and utilize GSR and APR scores as evidence that big-time college sport has one clear focus—education—our study offers support for an alternative conclusion. While GSR data may be aggregated to present a more palatable image of the collegiate model, disparities in graduation rates between profit-athletes and the general student body, as well as large-scale clustering of such athletes, are examples of systemic impediments to profit-athletes' equal-educational access.

While the data in this paper are admittedly limited to a select group of universities, these higher-education institutions are—without question—among the most important in the country in terms of size, the role they play in their respective states, and the hugely out-sized role they play in "major" college athletics. Our results both support and challenge the findings of other studies. We especially challenge the NCAA's claims of comparable athlete-student body graduation rates, something that can appear to be the case when considering all student-athletes, but arguable when focusing on racial differences, especially (as in our study) for Black males in major revenue sports.

In sharp contrast to the NCAA's claims of comparable graduation rates based on all sports, our study's results clearly demonstrate negative graduation gaps exist between Black male basketball and football players and full-time male students. This finding supports the effect of restrictions faced by this population of athletes, which are the result of their unique educational and athletic work experiences. Because these athletes are not "regular" students, our major empirical and theoretical conclusion is that a more nuanced theoretical perspective that accounts for individual, structural, and organizational level influences is necessary for any future research.

It is also important to situate our results within a college-sport industry embroiled in ongoing legal and societal challenges. In response to these challenges to its Collegiate Model of Athletics, the NCAA national office has sought to disseminate a rebranded definition of academic success. As Myles Brand (late NCAA President) proclaimed in 2006, "the business of college sports is not a necessary evil, [but] a proper part of the overall enterprise" (p. 8). Consequently, the NCAA and its members have sought to rebrand academic success and blunt criticisms of big-time college sport by pointing to record GSRs as evidence college athletes are provided an opportunity for a world-class education (Southall, 2014b). While such systematic and sustained rebranding is not inherently unethical, its use has successfully obscured the

college sport industry's institutional hegemony and allowed the industry to portray itself as an educational enterprise (Gramsci, 1971; Southall & Staurowsky, 2013). For the past quarter-century the NCAA has been remarkably disciplined and consistently stayed on message. Similar to its use of the term "student-athlete," the association has used its GSR as a rebranded definition of academic success to camouflage its profit-seeking tendencies.

While it is beyond the scope of this project to determine if the time demands or career aspirations linked to role engulfment are responsible for academic graduation gaps, future research would benefit from Division-I state flagship universities becoming more transparent regarding their admission policies. Access to special-admission standards, ACT and SAT scores, and high school grades (in aggregate and deidentified) of FBS football and NCAA D-I men's basketball players would allow scholars to gain greater insights on pressing social issues such as academic preparedness, exploitation, and the stigmatization of the Black male revenue-sport athletes as academically inferior. Although these data are not currently accessible to the general public, the NCAA Eligibility Center and/or Division-I member institutions likely collect such information (NCAA, 2015).

To gain a more nuanced understanding of the NCAA and Division-I flagship institutions' response to graduation rate gaps, we recommend conducting ethnographic investigations that utilize institutional isomorphism as the theoretical starting point. On a practical level, athletes, administrators, and the public will benefit from institutional investigations that lead to effective policy change focused on raising athlete graduation rates (regardless of the metric utilized) and reducing graduation gaps. In terms of the scientific community, an empirical inquiry that employs institutional ethnography can assist in combining theory and method by emphasizing the connections among sites, situations of everyday life, professional practice, and policy making.

NOTES

1. The NCAA does not report an ethnic group's FGR if there are two or fewer students in that group for a particular sport.

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